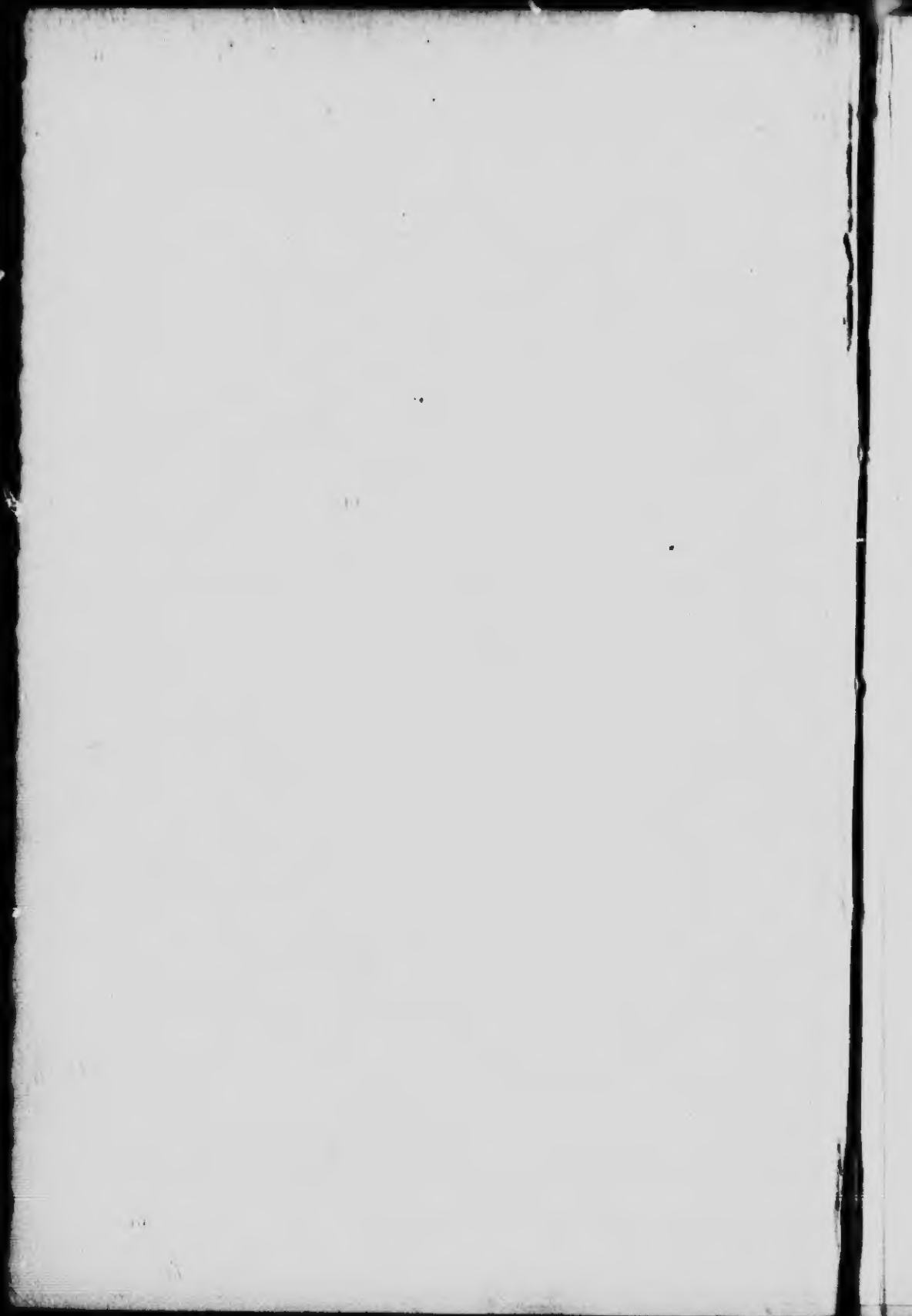




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PÈRE JEAN
and other Stories





Yours sincerely
Green H. H. H.

FACSIMILE OF SIGNATURE.

PÈRE JEAN

And other Stories

By AILEEN HINGSTON

BURNS AND OATES
ORCHARD STREET, LONDON, W.



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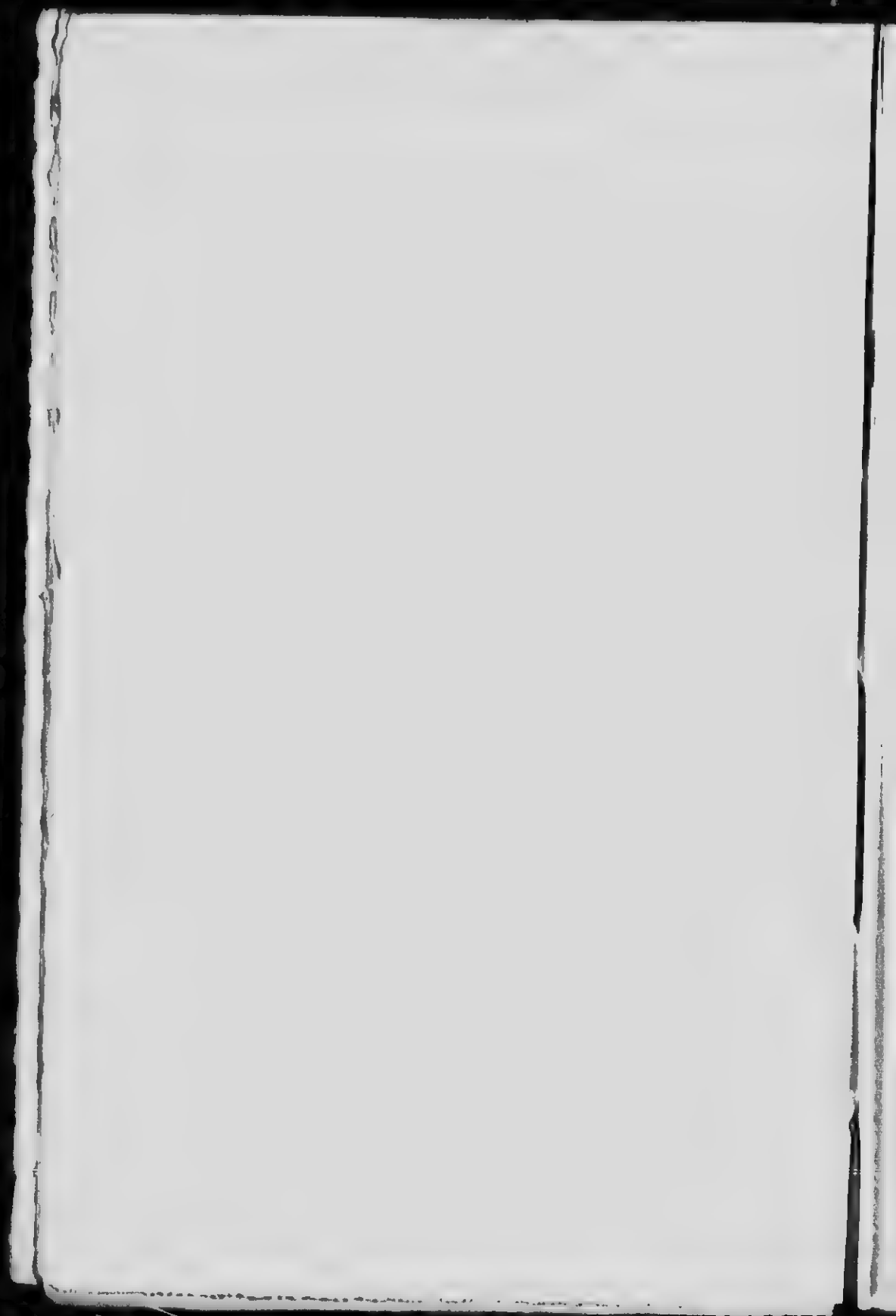
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Père Jean ; and other Stories.

MEMOIR.

FROM the point of view of posterity, we are, in the words of a profound critic of life and art "but a series of memories reflected upon other memories." The vanishing years are visible to us only through an intricate network of human histories. These, for the most part, melt and fade quickly into the ever-receding background of the past. But a few stand out more clearly like threads of gold or silver in a many-patterned fabric of neutral tones. Nor is it alone the life of strenuous effort or brilliant achievement that is thus permitted to triumph over the grave. Some rare souls are privileged to rise to the highest levels of human perfection without ever being called into the area of strain and

struggle where the sterner virtues are acquired, the bolder victories won.

The subject of our brief sketch was of these favoured few. Surrounded from her birth by all the influences best calculated to develop a naturally sensitive, aspiring soul along safe and satisfying lines, her life was indeed lovely and singularly happy from its opening to its close. The love of all who knew her followed her unsought, and for the most part unguessed. Young as she was, many leaned on her, seeing how steadfastly she held to her ideals, how deep-rooted were the foundations of her faith and her charity. To those who knew her not, the message of her sinless, joyous passage through this world is worthy to be repeated, if it be possible in a few inadequate pages to preserve and diffuse such a precious, fragrant memory.

Mary Aileen Hingston was born in Montreal, on February 21st, 1883. The fourth of six children, and an only daughter—an elder sister having died in her infancy—it was the happy lot of this beloved and gifted child to grow up to the most attractive period of young womanhood closely sheltered from contact with all the sadder and sterner aspects of life. The flowering of an exqui-

site nature was retarded by no untoward circumstance or condition.

Doubly blessed in her parents, the child was subjected to no restraints save those imposed by tender vigilance and foresight in the atmosphere of a cultivated Christian home. Her father, William Hales Hingston, M.D., while still a young man had gained an enviable reputation as a physician no less conscientious than kind. His later skill as a surgeon gradually brought him to the front rank in his profession. As the years went by he was destined to enjoy every mark of honour and distinction open to a man of his attainments. Though closely wedded to his chosen vocation, he was not permitted to devote his time and talents exclusively to the labours he loved best. Called successively to the Mayoralty of Montreal, and the Dominion Senate, his picturesque and commanding figure became widely known, admired, and beloved throughout Canada. Inflexible in matters of principle, and distinguished by a certain stateliness of manner and mien, he was nevertheless genial and sympathetic by nature, and in the cause of charity indefatigable. He loved the poor and was loved by them because he gave them ungrudgingly of his

best service. With the true Irishman's quick and keen appreciation of wit and intellect, he was always ready to encourage talent wherever he found it. The discovery of imaginative power and the gift of expression in his young daughter, some manifestations of which had been noted in her early childhood, must have been to a man of his temperament, a source of deep and peculiar satisfaction.

In 1876, Dr. Hingston married Margaret, daughter of the Honourable Donald Alexander Macdonald, the Lieutenant-Governor of Ontario. This ideally happy union was crowned with a charming family. At one in their views as to the value and scope of parental authority, sweetened by loving companionship with their children, these two perfectly-mated and noble souls enjoyed for a period covering thirty years of unbroken domestic felicity, every kind and degree of satisfaction compatible with the highest Christian ideals of family life.

By turns the eager playfellow and strict monitor of his children, Dr. Hingston was their constant companion and friend, in so far as his numerous other activities, professional, political, social, and philanthropic permitted. Especially did he love the

graceful, winsome girl, sunny-haired and laughing-eyed, in the gradual unfolding of whose mind and heart he might justly and proudly have recognised the finest flower of his own endeavours, the rich reward of his long devotion to duty, his persistent renunciation of sense and self. To the growing girl, such close and happy intimacy with a man of his vast and varied experience was of inestimable value as well as a source of unfailing delight. Nor was she less fortunate in being the constant companion of her mother, between whom and herself there existed a rare sympathy.

A healthy check to the possible over-development of the spiritual side of Aileen's character was supplied by the presence in the home of her four manly, if sometimes irrepressible brothers, whose inventive minds delighted in planning surprises for the dreamy but eagerly responsive girl, occasionally providing astonishing material for the workings of her active imagination. William, the eldest of the four, who subsequently joined the Jesuit Order, became in a particular sense, in later years, the friend and adviser of his sister.

Of the short life passed quietly, in part at home, in part with friends and teachers

abroad, there is little to record. Aileen was for some years a pupil at the Sacred Heart Convent, Montreal, being sent later, at the age of seventeen, to Roehampton, London, England, the well-known educational house of the same Order. The year spent there was a very happy one, full of pleasant associations. A number of sincere friendships were formed, both among classmates and mistresses, which were not interrupted by separation and distance. On leaving Roehampton, a sojourn of several months was made in Paris, where Aileen was entered as *grande pensionnaire* at the Sacred Heart Convent. Then, in the summer of 1902, came reunion with the family at their country seat at Varennes, on the St. Lawrence River, a quaint old house occupying a beautifully wooded point dignified by some interesting historic landmarks.

Some authorities speak of this old place as the actual site of the heroic defence, in the early days of the colony, by Madeleine Verchères, of the fort which that intrepid girl of fourteen held against a band of Indians, with only a feeble old man and a child to help her. In the autumn the family returned to their town house on Sherbrooke Street. The following winter Aileen made

her entrance into society, and was present at all the important social functions of the season.

In 1896, Dr. (now Sir William) Hingston had been called to the Senate of the Dominion Parliament. The year previous, in recognition of his eminent service to the medical profession, a knighthood had been conferred on him. His daughter's place in society was therefore well defined, and she was speedily engaged in a round of duties, domestic, social, and charitable. As Secretary of the Hospital for Incurables at Notre Dame de Grace, she became deeply interested in the Poor and Aged of that Institution, and spent much time visiting them. Pleasant interludes to these activities at home came in the form of occasional visits to friends in other cities, as when, with her parents, the guests at Government House, Ottawa, she had the experience of appearing at the Opening of Parliament with the Vice-Regal party. Travelling frequently also with her father, when medical conventions demanded his attendance in various parts of the United States or abroad, these trips, fraught with the pleasure of his stimulating companionship, the delight in fresh scenes, and the many new ties formed *en route*, served as an introduction to the

wider interests of life. An event of importance which marked her last trip abroad in the company of both her parents, was a private audience granted by the Holy Father, Pius X, during which he conversed with each of his three visitors in turn, and at parting, gave to Aileen a much-prized photograph of himself on which he wrote some appropriate lines.

At home, Aileen always found abundant sources of happiness and congenial occupation in books, pictures, music, the quiet of the country, and long days spent out of doors driving or walking. Always fond of reading, she commenced, shortly after her return from school, the modest attempts at literary work, from which she was destined to derive an intense pleasure. The encouragement and sympathy of her eldest brother, whose criticism and advice she constantly sought, confirmed her inclination towards a pursuit which soon became the favourite occupation of her leisure moments. Unfortunately, no regular hours could be given to literary work, and it was only in the intervals snatched from other interests that the young author felt justified in devoting herself to the development of her undoubted talents.

The long summer quiet of days spent at Varennes brought the best opportunities for thought and study, and for that intimate acquaintance with the character of the French Canadian *habitant* which lends a peculiar charm to the stories of *Père Jean* and *Le Croche*. To Miss Hingston these days were full of a peace which remained with her to the end as a delightful and harmonious memory, and the old house at Varennes, with its romantic surroundings and tender associations, grew each season more dear and precious.

Early in 1907, the first dark shadow fell on the home hitherto so singularly preserved from sorrow and misfortune. On the 19th of February, Sir William, who was in his seventy-eighth year, passed away quietly, surrounded by his family, after an illness of less than twenty-four hours.

Aileen, always a devoted daughter, was not denied the comfort of ministering to her adored father in his last moments. The shock of losing him was severe, but endowed, as she was, with the rare courage and serenity of a faith that dwelt always in the consciousness of the Unseen, sorrow had no power to crush her; rather it was to prove a great awakener of latent strength,

the door to unsuspected maturity. It was on her twenty-fourth birthday that she watched the sad procession which bore away the one she had indeed loved best on earth. A few days before, the world had never seemed brighter or more beautiful. Now all was sadly changed, but there was no vain repining, no selfish absorption in personal grief. The months which followed were full of tender ministrations to the bereaved mother and family. Short months they seemed to the friends who were privileged to witness the fortitude and loving devotion they called forth, and who now recall the wonderful development of character in which rare promise so quickly gave place to the unfolding of a strong, brave womanhood.

Towards the middle of June the family moved as usual to Varennes, which afforded so desirable a seclusion during the period of mourning. Only a few intimate friends shared the quiet hospitality here of the bereaved home. Dr. Donald Hingston, the second son, on whom his father's professional mantle had descended, now became the virtual head of the family. The brothers living at home were usually detained in town during the week, but a complete family

reunion, with the addition of a few relatives and special friends, was a regular feature of the Sundays at Varennes. No one looked forward more eagerly to these meetings than Aileen, and those who beheld her, always the centre of the group composing the house-party, could well understand the lavish devotion of which she was the happy and grateful object.

The first half of the summer passed thus peacefully away. It was on Sunday, the 4th of August, that the pall of a double tragedy descended with awful swiftness on this scene of so many quiet, happy gatherings. The calm, majestic river, the cloudless sky, gave no hint of impending doom to the occupants of the little sail-boat that put off from the shore within full view of the house on that lovely summer morning. Aileen was at the rudder; and the sunny head turned for a moment to smile an adieu to the black-robed figure on the verandah, watching, a little anxiously, in the way of mothers, the motions of the craft as it rounded the point, and passed out of sight.

What would probably have been regarded as a very ordinary accident, had help only been nigh, was destined, for want of it, to desolate two homes and to plunge the whole

countryside in gloom. Before a hand could be stretched to save, the pitiess waters had closed over Aileen and her companion. All the bright hopes formed for her future were suddenly blotted out to give way to a cureless sorrow. A whole week passed before the ceaseless efforts of the anxious searchers were ended. On August 10th, 1907, all that was mortal of the gifted and beloved girl was laid to rest beside her father in the Côte des Neiges Cemetery, on the slopes of Mount Royal.

In appearance, Miss Hingston was tall and graceful, of fair colouring, with soft blue eyes, from which, when the face was in repose, a certain wistfulness of expression was never absent. Her gaze was frank and direct, her smile merry and full of whimsical humour that was most endearing. Her whole personality was suggestive of the dreamer and idealist, of one who dwelt apart from her kind in a world peopled by her own thoughts and fancies. But she was a practical idealist, one who kept faithful tryst with her conscience. No girl could pass out of life at the age of twenty-four, leaving behind in the hearts of her friends such vivid memories of spiritual strength, of graciousness and sincerity, so keen a

sense of personal loss and peculiar reverence, without having wrought the tissue of a lofty purpose into the fabric of her daily life. How deeply her influence had penetrated the lives of those about her became apparent during the dark days following her death, when so many messages of profound and wide-felt sympathy sped to the comfort of the mourners. What that influence meant in the way of help and inspiration to those who knew and loved her best can be understood only by themselves.

Her nature was deeply religious. Hers was a cheerful spirituality, so spontaneous and natural that no one—however worldly-minded or sceptical—could dislike or resent it. Her high ideals of duty and extraordinary delicacy of conscience were troubled by no unnecessary scruples, nor constrained by any form of narrowness or bigotry. A frank love of gaiety and a keen sense of humour made every kind of social relation easy and agreeable to her, and with her. She was welcomed everywhere because of this secret she possessed of putting all persons instantly at their ease. But it was by her intimate girl friends that she was most dearly loved and warmly appreciated. She had unconsciously gained over them a

remarkable ascendancy. It was a generous tribute on their part to her unquestioned sincerity and sweetness. Their grief over her sudden removal from their midst was touchingly profound and enduring. This was strikingly attested by their loving and persistent efforts to comfort and cheer the principal sufferer in the heart-breaking tragedy. Hardly a day passed for many months after the bright young life had gone out with such awful swiftness, that did not bring to the sorely-stricken mother some fresh sign of the love and reverence in which her daughter's memory was cherished by these faithful friends of her choice.

Concerning the stories which follow, little need be said; they bear their own message. They are published by loving friends with the kind permission of Lady Hingston, as a posthumous fulfilment of the young writer's modest hope, recorded in her diary, that she might one day be recognised as a member of the literary craft.

Beginning with *A Christmas Story of To-day*, which appeared in January, 1903, Miss Hingston followed up this first success by the publication of *Père Jean* and "*When it Came.*" *Le Croche*, written in 1907, awaited

a revision, destined, alas! to remain unaccomplished. The finishing touches have been added reverently and with all possible restraint by the hand of a friend who was in the secret of the young author's literary ambition. Miss Hingston always spoke enthusiastically of the abundant material lying so close to hand throughout the scattered communities of the Province of Quebec, and she had hoped to travel further afield with her pen in this direction.

To those acquainted with such scenes, the two stories dealing with the primitive conditions of life in a French-Canadian village must vividly recall certain familiar pictures. The local colour is wonderfully true in tone, and against the realistic background, the characters stand forth with remarkable distinctness, seeming to live indeed, by reason of their tenderness and truth.

A melancholy interest attaches to the illustrations which accompany two of the stories. The late Henri Julien, whose insight into the many-sided *bonhomie* of the *habitant* class insured a sympathetic handling of the themes suggested by the stories, was not spared to finish the task he had readily undertaken. Only two of the drawings had been made when Death

claimed the artist, suddenly, as the author herself had been called away.

The volume now goes forth in its touching incompleteness, a mere fragment of what it might have been, but precious because of the suggestion it carries of lofty ideals of love and duty. Slight as are the stories in structure and delicate in treatment, they nevertheless seem to sound the depths of human nature. They reveal the serenity of spirit, the philosophic outlook, the unerring sense of values, that one is accustomed to associate only with the ripeness of age or the maturity of a large experience. No less remarkable is the classic simplicity of style, the directness and precision of ideas, the admirable restraint and modesty so unlike the usually affected or inflated manner of writers in their first youth. Such proofs of latent power carried the plain prophecy of a brilliant literary career. Yet we may reasonably doubt if even in her maturer efforts, the sweetness and purity of intention that guided the gentle author's pen in portraying *Père Jean*, *Le Croche*, and the other touching characters of her creation, could have ever been surpassed.

A MEMORY.

Near her 'twould seem that Nature blithelier
sang

The roundelay of summer, and there rang
A sweeter melody within the breeze

Attune amid the elm and maple trees—

Such was her presence. When, upon the
street,

To greet her friends, with ready glance and
word

She paused, they went the brighter—having
heard—

About the rounds of their accustomed day.

Such was her manner ; while upon her face

Reigned the dream-quiet of a visioned grace.

Hers was no voice to claim a service done,

To sound the hallowed sweetness that had
won

About her name, or boast of gifts more rare,

Unfolding to a future which should bear

Their promise to fulfilment and success.

Courage and love and duty formed a part

Of each day's going ; for all else her heart

Rested secure in that large gift of faith—

Joyous in life that could not end with Death !

MARY HICKSON.

PÈRE JEAN.

FOR the third time that evening, good Madame Latour stood hesitating at the door of her master's room. Not as on the two former occasions, did she now content herself with a disapproving shake of her head, but, urged by the sight of the still untasted supper, knocked loudly. There was no response.

"Humph, that letter!" murmured Madame Latour, and then advanced to the priest's side. He started and for a moment his eyes wore a far-away look, then they rested kindly on the portly figure of his housekeeper beside him.

"Ah, it is you, Madame Latour!" he said, smiling, as he folded the letter before him, "do you want anything?"

"I want you to eat your supper, Monsieur le Curé," she answered, with the respectful familiarity to which her twenty years' service fairly entitled her.

"Ah, true, I had forgotten," he answered—then with a glance at the humble repast—"somehow, I am not hungry this evening."

"Now this will not do at all," his house-keeper expostulated. "You have had a tiring day, Père Jean, and to-morrow will be the first Friday, and everyone says you are looking ill—and they will say I starve you—and I do my best, but what can I do?" Madame Latour paused from sheer lack of breath, when the curé said soothingly :

"My child, the trouble is you spoil me. No one can say you do not, and that is all you will have to answer for. There, perhaps after all I *am* hungry," he added, drawing his chair to the table.

Somewhat appeased, the good woman withdrew, but she paused for a moment at the doorway to remark, somewhat interrogatively, "Your letter contained good news I trust, Père Jean?"

"Yes, yes, the best of news," answered the curé eagerly. "It is from my friend the missionary in China of whom you have heard me speak. He is now in a wild part of the country, where the natives are cruel and uncivilised, and hate missionaries bitterly. At any moment he may be put to death! By a singular good fortune he met a party of English travellers who promised to forward this letter from Pekin—otherwise I should not have had it."

"Mon Dieu, and you say *that* is good news!" ejaculated the housekeeper.

"Yes, the best of news," answered the priest, and there was a joyful ring in his voice, "the best of news, for then indeed the glorious crown of martyrdom will be his."

With a wondering look the housekeeper withdrew, shutting the door softly.

The priest poured out a cup of the coffee upon which Madame Latour justly prided herself, but he could not taste it nor the morsel of cold toast he broke off. Pushing back his chair, he arose, walked over to the window, and stood looking at the country scene without. How fair it looked in the sunset glow, with the first touch of autumn on the gold-tinged leaves and waving Indian maize. Before him lay the little village of Sainte Barbe with its cluster of houses along the one winding street, and a few more dotted here and there on the hill-sides. It was a simple French-Canadian parish like a hundred others scattered over the Laurentians; simpler, perhaps, and more old-fashioned than most, for the railway came only to St. Clovis, twelve miles away, and the nearest town was thirty miles distant.

Sainte Barbe was a poor parish, and the

little dwellings were for the most part wooden cabins, whitewashed or gaily painted, and each with a tiny patch of garden. But here and there was a house of stone and mortar, landmarks of the old French *régime*, and relics of the days when it had been a trading post.

Yet, like many other settlements it now was "off the road," and though older, it was in reality far behind St. Clovis, which could boast of a thriving creamery and a cheese factory. The inhabitants of Sainte Barbe were in no wise envious of their more progressive neighbours, but were content to eke out their modest existence by dint of hard labour on a not too productive soil. Though money was scarce, food was always plentiful, and the woods yielded ample fuel to keep the fire blazing merrily even in the poorest cottage during the long, cold winter. So they were satisfied with their lot, for aught we may say, knowing a rarer and truer happiness that is always to be found among the poor, and Ah! how seldom among the rich!

For their saintly old curé they had the deepest veneration. He was their guide and adviser, and the mediator in all their petty disputes.

The notary and the doctor who formed with him the village aristocracy were wont to complain laughingly that their advice or prescription was referred to the curé before it was followed.

Some of the older inhabitants remembered when half a century before he had come to Sainte Barbe—a young man with an earnest youthful face, and a kindly manner which at once endeared him to them all. "Monsieur le Curé" had seemed too grave a title, so his people had got into the way of calling him "Père Jean," and "Père Jean" he had remained ever since through the years that had silvered his hair, and brought a stoop to his tall form.

The sunset glow had faded and there was a chill in the evening air, but still the old priest stood motionless by the window. The letter tightly clasped in his hand had awakened a far-away past, and memories, long forgotten, now rose unbidden.

Once again they were college boys, Edouard and he, and his eyes grew bright or dim at the recollection of some prank or punishment shared together. They had been different even then: Edouard, quick and impetuous and with a persuasive eloquence, which had made him a leader among

the other boys—himself quiet, almost timid, now following, now restraining the friend he loved dearly. Unlike in character, they were united by a deep, generous affection such as is formed in early youth, when the heart is fresh and loving, and which often remains unchanged amid the doubts and disillusionments of age.

The dream of each had been to become a missionary, and side by side to labour for God's glory in a pagan land.

Then had followed, after a few peaceful years at the Seminary, that never-to-be-forgotten day when they had received ordination. Soon after it seemed as if their dearest wish was to be realized, for an earnest appeal came for missionaries to China, and they had eagerly offered themselves. Then had come a disappointment, so keen and so bitter that even now, after fifty years, the memory of it came back with intense vividness. Edouard was granted the coveted permission, while to himself, after he had made his plea, and answered a few searching questions, the bishop had said, "My son, this is not the life intended for you; God has chosen you for a different work, none the less His because it is different."

A day later the friends parted ; Edouard, whose joy was over-shadowed by the other's pain, went to China, and he, Jean, to Sainte Barbe.

There had followed for the missionary a life of hardship and labour. The very qualities which had distinguished him at college stood him in good stead now. The fame of his teaching spread afar, and he untiringly preached, converted and baptized.

Once in a while a letter would come to his friend in the little French-Canadian village and the curé would read it with joy and with pride. If there was still a longing in his heart for other fields, he was unconscious of it, for he had determined to devote all his energies to the little flock intrusted to his care.

How peacefully the years had passed for him he reflected now. There was scarcely a ripple to mark one decade from another.

He had seen the children grow up and marry and have children of their own. He had stood by the bedside of his "older children" when, fearful of the Unknown lying darkly at hand, yet humbly trustful that all would be well, they would plead—"Pray for me, Père Jean"; and he stood by the new-made grave in the little hill-side

cemetery until the last clod fell on the rough-hewn coffin, and he knew that another traveller starting on his homeward journey had gone not unprepared. What kindly folks he dwelt among, so considerate for his comfort, so careful to avoid whatever might give him pain. There was, however, an exception. He could now see a tiny thread of smoke rising above a small unpainted cabin which stood away from the other houses. A solitary man lived there who spoke to no one, and was unloved by all.

Years before, when a lad, he had gone away to the city, and obtained a good position in a mill. Quick and nimble, his promotion had been rapid, until one day there had been an accident which maimed him for life, and he had come back to Sainte Barbe a cripple.

The kindly folks who had known him from infancy had come with their offerings of aid and sympathy, and were sorely hurt and puzzled when he curtly refused both, and took possession of a deserted cottage, where he lived no one knew how.

Something beside the cruel accident had changed the light-hearted lad into a soured man, something had entered his heart like steel and rankled there. The older folks

thought of him pityingly. The little children named him "le Croche," and ran to their mothers when his crooked form came in sight, for was not a man who never went to church, and who avoided their good curé, only a degree removed from the Evil One himself?

"Le Croche" seemed indifferent to people's opinion regarding him, and became, if possible, more bitter and silent as time passed.

The priest sighed as he thought of his "black sheep" and of his futile efforts to win him back again. Then his eyes left the fast darkening scene, and sought his own little room, which was plainly furnished, but warm and homelike. A bright-hued vase stood on the mantelpiece. It had been a present from Madame Latour when her cousin in town died and left her a legacy. This was only a few dollars, but she had felt quite rich for a time, and her first act was to buy a gift for her master. The flowers it contained were from little Jeanette, who lived next door, and who regarded it as her special charge that the curé should be provided with the best blossoms of her garden. The somewhat gaudy picture of the Holy Family had been the doctor's

birthday gift, and the notary had given the clock on a similar occasion. There were other trifles, which, though of no value in themselves, yet helped to give the little room an appearance of comfort. He had often thought lovingly and gratefully, if regretfully, how cosy it was, but now with his heart full of love for the friend who might even then be shedding his blood in distant China, each article seemed to reproach him for a self-indulgence, of which he was in no wise guilty. The picture of that other life so full of suffering and sacrifice rose before him and seemed in pitiful contrast to his own.

What victory, and what service could he show to his Master when his stewardship should be yielded up? He, too, had had a long life—and yet, was he not empty-handed? “And I wished to become a missionary,” he told himself, sadly. “I, who have done so little as a parish priest. The bishop was indeed wise to refuse my audacious request and to place me among a good, pious people, ready to overlook my shortcomings and forgive my faults.”

This was perhaps the bitterest moment of his life, and as he stood there at the open window he trembled, and the hand that

grasped the sill was cold and damp. "My God, my God," burst from his lips, "I meant to do so much for Thee, and I have done so little."

"Père Jean!" it was a small childish voice accompanied by a warm little hand which was laid gently on his own. The appealing accent and touch brought wonderful soothing to the priest's troubled heart. There was no trace of the last moment's anguish in the curé's kind smile, as he looked down at the small bare-footed urchin who stood outside the window. "Well, petit Paul, what is it?" he asked.

"It is grand'mère," the boy answered, digging his bare toes into the garden gravel, "her rheumatism is very bad to-day."

"And has not the doctor been to see her?"

"Oh, yes, Père Jean, and he gave her some medicine, but she says she will not suffer so much if you will come to see her?"

A moment later the two were walking, hand in hand, down the village street.

It was the hour so dear to the "Habitant," when, supper over, families congregate on the door-steps, the men with their pipes, and the women with their babies in their arms, and the older children playing near

by. The sound of merry voices was borne on the sweet twilight air—the women's as they chatted gaily, the children's as they danced about and called to one another in their play.

When the curé passed by every hat was lifted; every woman curtsied, while many left their door-steps for a word of greeting. One, an old woman, came up to say that she had just had news of her son in the city, who was getting on so well that he would surely soon be rich. A little further on, a buxom matron told him triumphantly that her daughter Rosalie was soon to make the best match in the village, and Rosalie, a bright-eyed girl of seventeen, followed to receive with shy gratitude the curé's good wishes.

Here and there a man stopped for a word of advice, or a child left its play for the smile and caress that never failed it.

The loving eyes that followed him caught no hint of the deep sorrow which lay heavy upon his heart. One or two thought he looked old and tired, and hoped it was the evening shadows which made him seem so. The doctor, a wiry little man, and a wise little man too, glanced keenly at the tall figure as it passed, and then remarked to

his friend, the notary, that it was high time that "Père Jean" had a vicar—Sainte Barbe was too large a parish for one man. "He has worked so hard all his life," he said, "it must be made easier for him now."

"Grand'mère's" cottage stood at the end of the long row. It was a neat little home, and the room where "Grand'mère" lay was clean and bright.

It had indeed been a long day, and there would be no rest for her in the long night that was setting in, for the pain in her poor old body was unceasing. The withered face resting on the spotless pillow was drawn and worn by suffering, but it changed wonderfully when the curé entered. A chair was placed at her bedside, and he asked her very gently about her suffering, and listened pityingly to her murmured answer that it was more than she could bear. Her face was very patient, almost happy, when he left half an hour later, for, had not "Père Jean" told her that all the pain she was enduring might be winning salvation not alone for herself but for some poor sinner, and that when she arrived in heaven—perhaps very soon, *le bon Dieu* would thank her for the soul she had won back to Him?

"Come and serve the early mass to-

morrow, petit Paul," the curé said, as the little boy escorted him to the door, and the child, feeling very important, promised to be punctual.

It was now almost dark, but instead of turning homeward, the priest continued on into the country. That instinct of loneliness, which seeks rather than shuns solitude, made him long to be alone.

How calm and restful it was beyond the village, with the stars overhead, and the great silence of the hills around. But, with the peace of nature surrounding him, his own heart did not grow calmer! There was still that deep sorrow that he had done so little for his Master. In his great loneliness and regret his thoughts flew with intense love and longing to his boyhood's friend. If only he could see him, just for a moment feel the warm clasp of his hand and read in his eyes the assurance that he understood what had not even been expressed.

It was strange that there came to him no soothing message telling him that his life had not been the useless one he thought it, but an infinitely beautiful one in its humility and unselfishness. Quiet and peaceful it had undoubtedly been, but full of a devotion to duty, which had dignified and ennobled it,

raising it far above the plane of the commonplace to the level of the heroic.

The nameless, countless acts of goodness, of which, in his humility, he was unconscious, had not been unseen by the recording angel, and the influence of his bright example would live on after he had passed away.

But the silence and solitude brought him no such cheerful tidings, and slowly and wearily he walked on.

But now he must turn homeward, he told himself; he would rest only a little while on this doorstep before retracing his way. He had been there but a moment when he was startled by a hand on his shoulder.

"Come inside and rest—it is cold and dark there!"

To the priest's amazement he saw that it was the hunchback who had spoken, and who now threw open the door of his tiny cabin, revealing a bright fire within.

"Thank you, Pierre, I shall come in and warm myself, for I am a little cold," the curé answered simply. "And tired," the man added briefly. "You are very tired!" He drew a chair up to the cheery blaze, but ventured no further remark when

the priest sank into it and stretched out his hands to the warmth.

The curé noticed how bare and comfortless the room was, such a room as only a solitary man can have.

He realized suddenly how strange it was that he should be sitting there after having failed repeatedly in his efforts to plead with this man. Had he indeed softened? No; the dark, half-averted face was cold and grim as ever, as the cripple moved about among the remains of his scanty meal, seemingly oblivious of his visitor's presence. Then in a flash the priest understood it all! The man had suffered some cruel blow besides the maiming of his body, but he was desperately proud, so that any pity was to him inexpressibly galling. Nevertheless, had he not yielded to a generous impulse in offering hospitality to the curé, whom he had avoided for years?

If he could not let a tired man rest upon his doorstep without inviting him to his fireside, then, indeed, there was good in "le Croche" still. And as the curé sat there, watching the half-averted face in the shadow, he was conscious of a deeper pity than he had yet felt for this strange, lonely creature. The ache in his own breast was forgotten,

and his heart went out to the other man in a rush of fatherly sympathy; still his voice was only quiet and friendly, when he said at last:

"You are too generous with this splendid fire of yours, Pierre, for you give it all to me, surely there is enough of it for both of us. Come, draw up your chair, *mon ami*."

The man hesitated, then slowly, and with obvious reluctance brought a stool to the other end of the chimney, where he remained with his face still averted. There was silence. The priest was inwardly praying for light and guidance, for he felt that his presence there was due to no mere accident, and that he might yet win back his black sheep.

"Do you still care for apples, Pierre?" he asked suddenly; then, as the hunchback turned a surprised and distrustful face towards him, he continued: "Why, don't you remember when you used to come to my house and beg for an apple off my one tree? The frost killed that tree last winter, Pierre—and I have none for the children now."

"Yes, I remember," the other answered, slowly. "I have never tasted apples like those."

"That is indeed a compliment," said the curé brightly, "and one which I must repeat to Madame Latour, for she loved that tree as a child, and was quite heart-broken when it died."

There was a softer look on the man's face as he said, almost timidly, "I thrashed a boy once for stealing some of those apples; he was bigger than I was, but I made him throw them back, over your gate." Then he added bitterly, "I could not thrash any child now."

"Pierre, my poor dear boy, tell me all about it." There was such an eager, loving appeal in the cry—the cry of a father to a son, and in the outstretched hands, that the poor fellow could not resist it, and so sitting there while the fire-light threw its ruddy light around the little room, he told his sad life story. How he had gone away to the city full of life and hope, eager to make his way, caring little how hard he had to work. Promotion had followed—and love. They were to have been married within a week when the accident happened—he had been caught up by the machinery and terribly mangled. He had been weeks in the hospital and then emerged—to be told that the girl he loved had become engaged to

another man. "How could she marry a *hunchback*?" she asked him, and so, embittered in spirit, and shattered in body, he had come back to spend his poor shackled life in his old home.

"Ah, Père Jean!" he cried bitterly, "you do not know what it is to have a hope, which is part of one's very life, crushed; to lose in a moment the joy and independence of youth, and become instead a miserable castaway who can look forward only to the grave; who can never realize anything of what he had hoped for—to look back upon disappointment, to feel that the future holds only disappointment. God is not just, I tell you, or He could not let such things be. You, whose life has been so useful and happy—you cannot know how bitter it is to feel one is useless, wanted by no one—needed by no one—a *failure*—you cannot understand."

Was it because he understood so well that the priest's face was so tender when he went over and put his arm around the poor crooked shoulders with almost a mother's touch? Surely, when he spoke there was that in his voice which showed he understood as only a *fellow sufferer* can understand. His words were full of the sympathy that

does not hurt, and they brought sweet comfort at last, for the man's proud face was buried in his hands, and all the years of bitter loneliness were washed away in tears of sorrow and repentance.

It was very late when the curé left the little cottage and turned homeward. His heart was full of a great joy and a deep gratitude that his wandering sheep had come home at last. He did not realize how long the road was until he stood by his own door, and saw the lamp placed at the window by Madame Latour's thoughtful hand.

But he must not go to bed just yet. He passed his own house and entered the church beyond. Under the red light before the tabernacle he fell on his knees. "My God, I thank Thee, I thank Thee," he repeated over and over again, and then—it was the prayer of a tired child: "Father, I have done so little, but I have done my best."

It was "petit Paul" who, coming in to serve the early mass, and coming early in his desire to be punctual, wondered to see the curé half kneeling, half leaning against the altar rail. He crept up softly and touched the priest's arm. "Père Jean," he whispered; then louder, "Père Jean." But there was no response, and doubtful

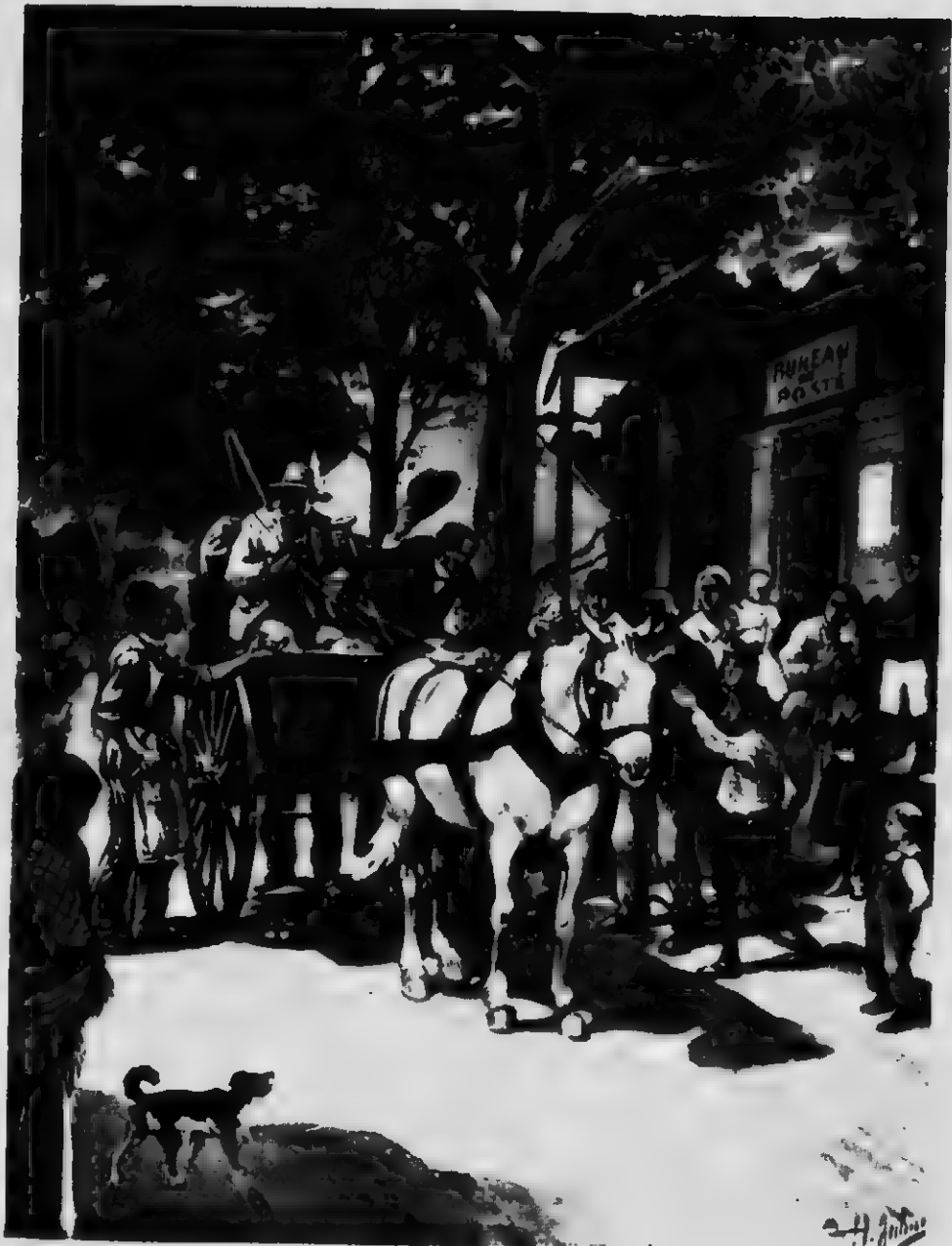
and afraid, he knew not why, the child turned and ran away. For during the night the summons had come, and the pale, upturned face wore a strange, sweet smile which told of peace eternal.

* * * *

Sainte Barbe is so far off the beaten road that the arrival of the mail is no small event. Twice a week a man goes to St. Clovis (Sainte Barbe does not boast of a Post Office as yet) and returns with the long brown sack. Then all the villagers assemble to talk over the contents of the letter bag and discuss the news of the papers.

To-day a little group is gathered in front of the doctor's house, and he has been reading aloud from his doorstep. Madame Latour is there, and the notary, and there too is Le Croche—crooked still—but now a useful and respected man. It is wonderful what the hunchback can do with his nimble fingers, which are seldom idle. He is always surrounded by little ones, clamouring for the tales he can tell so well, but he never seems to tire of them, and all the mothers think gratefully of the hunchback.

Still it is a subject of speculation in Saint Barbe "what *could* have changed 'le Croche'!"



LEAVING STE. BAUBE.

There is much of interest in the now three days old paper, but one item has a special significance for the good folks. It is an account of a little band of missionaries in China who were captured by some natives. The first victim, an old priest, who had long been noted for his great zeal and eloquence, was put to death amid great tortures, but his courage did not flag, and he died urging his persecutors to repent. So great was the effect of his words and bravery, that the wretches were seized with awe, and released the other prisoners, while many asked to be baptized on the spot.

There is silence for a moment after the doctor has finished, and then Madame Latour says with a little sob, "If Père Jean only knew, he would be so proud of him."

"Perhaps he *does* know," the doctor answered, gravely. "The missionary died on the first Friday, our curé on the eve of it. Now, allowing for the difference in time, they died on the same day—perhaps at the same hour, who knows," he added—"the two friends may have appeared before God together!"

"And if they did," Madame Latour says quaintly, "surely *le bon Dieu* did not let Père Jean stand there unnoticed and bestow all the

glory upon the missionary. He was so good to us, Père Jean, so——" but her tears are falling in earnest now. The Angelus rings out clear and sweet, and from every heart goes up a prayer of loving gratitude for the dear priest who had lived so quietly among them, and who had so quietly passed away.

LE CROCHE.

THE Angelus chimed out on the sweet evening air, and Le Croche slowly rose from the chair, laying down the basket he had been making, and the rushes from which he had been fashioning it, in a neat little pile. His work for the day was over, and he breathed a sigh of relief; then pushing back his chair, he walked to the open door, and went outside.

This hour was all his own. By-and-bye the children would come and clamour for his tales, or a neighbour strolling by would pause for a chat; but by common consent this was the supper hour at Sainte Barbe, and his ear could now catch the sound of cheerful voices, and the hardly less cheerful clatter of dishes from the cottages on either side. He turned and looked wistfully back at his own little cabin, plainly visible through the open door. With those gay sounds in his ears, and the happy scenes they evoked, in his mind, his own little two-roomed house looked inexpressibly

dreary. But he only shook his head. He must not think; and he resolutely called up a smile, and began to whistle a queer piercing tune. He had scarcely done so, however, when out came the children—a dozen or more, and Le Croche, caught in his own trap, gave in.

“Le Croche! Le Croche!” cried the young eager voices—“You will tell us a story, dear Le Croche?”—and a moment later the hunchback was in his chair again in the doorway with the children crowded round him.

Wonderful stories were those the hunchback knew; tales of brave knights and fair ladies of old France; of strange wild animals; of fairies and of the *loup-garou*. Of endless variety, they were always received with unabated joy, each one in its turn being pronounced better than the last.

But this evening he had a new tale to tell; of a youth who had had a fierce encounter with some terrible animal, and who after lying ill for a long, long time, had been told that he must for ever after go about lame and broken. “Like you, Le Croche?” asked a child, nestling close to him.

“Yes—like me, little one,” he answered with a smile in which there was no trace of

bitterness. But this poor young knight, ugly and helpless, had yet one glimmer of hope, for he felt that though others might desert him, the lady whom he loved so dearly could never think him changed or ugly ; but when he stood before her she put her hands in front of her face and cried—
“Go away ! Go away ! I cannot love *you*, now !” And so the poor knight, feeling alone indeed, went sadly away ; but as he did so, the great white love that was in his heart gave place to ugly spirits that troubled him day and night, making his deformity so hateful that he would speak to no one in his misery ; he hated himself ; hated others, and was hated by them in turn. For years his heart remained black and bitter like this, and he grew more and more unhappy each day.

Then, one day, when he was feeling sadder than ever, sitting alone in the home he had made for himself, another knight passed that way. He was old and worn, for he had fought on many a battlefield, and overcome many an enemy. He was very kind and gentle when he spoke to the poor crippled knight, and tried to show him that maimed and injured as he was, he could still be a true knight and fight for good ; that he

could still serve others, in little things, and that if he were kind, and patient, and loving, his service would rank as high as if he did great things that all the world knew of.

Then the afflicted knight understood for the first time how foolish he had been to waste his years in bitterness and loneliness, and he resolved to do as the great knight bade him, and his black load seemed suddenly lightened. He found it very hard sometimes to persevere ; but he did, and he grew gradually happy.

"And what about the beautiful lady?" asked a little girl who sat close to him.

"He never saw her again," the man answered, very low.

"Oh dear Le Croche ! make her see him again ; let her say she is sorry ! let her ask him to forgive her !" the child pleaded.

The man bent suddenly and kissed the little upturned face—"He will meet her again, *chérie*," he said ; "he will meet her, and then it will be *le bon Dieu* Himself who will explain it all away."

* * * *

There was a little flutter of excitement in Sainte Barbe. The mail, for the first time in the memory of those good people, had

brought a letter for Le Croche ! When the brown bag was carried in to the little post office, and Dame Robert had glanced over the contents, she could not repress an exclamation, which was not lost on the waiting crowd outside the grill.

"What is it?" someone asked quickly; but as quickly Dame Robert replied—"Oh, nothing!" The distribution did not take long, for the letters were never many for Sainte Barbe, hidden away in its little corner in the mountains. Madame Robert was, however, fully impressed with the importance of her *rôle*, and gazed with an officious air at the little pile before her, while the patient crowd eyed her, and it, expectantly.

"Here's a letter for you, from your son in Montreal, Madame Lebel," she began, and a wrinkled hand was thrust eagerly through the bars, and as eagerly withdrawn with the precious missive.

"'Toinette Picard!" continued the priestess from her shrine, and a young girl came forward blushing and smiling timidly.—

"Paul remains faithful then?" The crowd laughed; and then a dozen letters or more were briskly called and claimed, after which Madame Robert paused, with one between her hands. She seemed to examine it very

carefully, deliciously mindful the while of the expectant eyes and bated breath of her spectators. Then she said: "And last of all, here's a letter for Pierre Hurteau!"

The name sounded strange on her lips, and for a moment the little group looked questioningly at each other. At that instant a small figure came hobbling forward, pushing its way impatiently, and a trembling hand was held out towards Madame Robert. The good woman hesitated one pardonable moment before placing the letter in it; but it was instantly covered by the strong brown fingers, and the recipient hobbled quickly away. All eyes followed the bent, crooked figure, till the turn in the road hid it from their view. Then they looked at one another again in amazement—"A letter for Le Croche!" one said at last, breathlessly. "Yes, it is the first time in my experience at this post office of Sainte Barbe," Madame Robert remarked impressively; and in the reverent pause that followed, no one seemed to realize that she had never had any other experience in her life. Presently the group dispersed, talking over the news of their own letters, and of the three days old paper; but it was not long before the mysterious incident came up

in their conversation again. It was well known that the hunchback had no relations in Sainte Barbe or out of it; besides, a girl had declared that his letter was in a woman's handwriting; she had seen it before the cripple's hand closed on it!

"I don't see much harm in asking Le Croche if he has had good news; it would be merely polite," said Madame Lerou, his nearest neighbour.

"But your answer might not be so polite," laughed another.

"Le Croche never gratifies idle curiosity," put in one of the women tartly, "but for all that, we are bound to know before long. Whoever wrote that letter, after waiting all these years, must have had something of importance to communicate."

This remark, coming from one who was a cousin to 'e notary, had its effect, and they separated with that impression. But in many of the homes that night, after the little ones had been put to bed, and husbands and wives sat together, many a good man's patience was sorely taxed to find possible solutions to the puzzle; and many a kind woman at her bedside prayed that *le bon Dieu* might have only good in store

for poor Le Croche, who was himself so considerate of others.

The following day brought, however, a deepening instead of a solution of the mystery.

It began with Madame Blais' disclosure to her nearest neighbour, that having passed the hunchback's cottage on an early morning errand, she had seen him busily occupied dismantling his rooms, and taking down his beloved prints from the walls, smiling all the while, and sometimes even breaking into snatches of song, that sounded strange indeed from Le Croche's lips.

"When he saw me looking at the flowers in his little patch of garden," said Madame Blais, "I could only stammer something about 'how beautiful they were'—and then what do you suppose he did?—Began to pick them all—and me standing there too astonished to stop him; he picked them all, I tell you, every single one?"

"Not every one, surely!" her hearer ejaculated, for Le Croche's devotion to his garden was well known, and such ruthless generosity was inexplicable. "Every one," Madame Blais repeated gravely—"and when there was not one remaining, what do you suppose he did?—presented them to me

with a bow like a king, and said 'Madame Blais, may these flowers give you one little bit of the pleasure your friendship has been to me.'

"But, *ma chère*, what is the reason? What do you think of it?" asked the other.

"That I cannot say; and I own I am worried. I have heard of people acting that way when they are going to die, and though Le Croche looks all right, I mean to send one of the children over by-and-bye with some good hot soup."

This story of the flowers spread quickly, and Madame Blais—good soul—felt none too happy in her gift. Almost everyone in the village contrived to pass by the cripple's cottage in order to verify it, and, true enough, they found his garden shorn of all its glory—sad and desolate-looking. It was perhaps only natural that many glances after this should be directed at Madame Blais' cottage, glances of a curiosity not unmingled with a mild reproof which the good woman strongly resented.

"As if I had stolen them!" she said indignantly to herself.

This, however, did not prevent her from fulfilling her kindly resolve about the soup,

and presently her little son was despatched with it. A few minutes later he returned, jubilant, holding out for her inspection a big penknife, and exclaiming excitedly :

"Look! look! what Le Croche gave me!"

"P'tit Paul, take that back at once!" his mother commanded. "But Mama," the child pleaded, "he——" "No, you must take it back at once," his mother broke in; "do you think I want the neighbours to say we asked him for that too?"

"But he told me it was to make me remember him, when he went away," the child said.

"When he went away!" echoed the mother—"when he went away!"

"Yes—he is going away—this evening," the boy replied with both triumph and tears in his voice.

"Oh then, you may keep it; the poor dear man must be crazy, I think, and the others should know of it."

That they already did so was evident, when Madame Blais reached her front door. A knot of people stood before the house, and from their glances and gestures in the direction of the cripple's cottage, it

was plain that he was the subject of their conversation.

"You have heard?" one of them said, as she joined them.

"Yes; poor dear Le Croche!"

"And what do you think?"

"Think? Why it is plain enough. Le Croche is crazy!"

"But you would not say so if you talked with him; he is as sane as ever," someone protested.

"And still he has arranged with Vieux Jean to drive him to Saint Clovis with the mail bag this evening; there he goes on the cars—the Lord knows where!"

"But it ought not to be allowed!" exclaimed Madame Blais, aghast.

"What would you do, my friend?" asked a man in the group.

"Send for *Monsieur le Curé*."

"He has been to see him already," broke in another—"but we can see he knows no more than we do, for I saw him, myself, leave the *presbytère*, and *Monsieur le Curé* came to the door, and shook hands with him—not once—but several times, and said, 'Wherever you go, *mon brave*, God will bless you, for all you did for Him at Sainte Barbe'—and his voice was shaky when he

said it—and I think Le Croche must have forgotten his manners, for he just hobbled quickly away.

“But it’s true, that, what *Monsieur le Curé* said, and made me think of all Le Croche had done for me, and I felt choky too, and could not speak to him as he passed by!

“You know, when my father was dying, he came every day; and at the end, it was he that prayed beside him, and when it was all over, it was Le Croche who sat with me, and talked of him, with his hand on mine—until I cried and felt better!”

The speaker’s voice had grown husky with this recital.

“And when my little Florette had the fever, wasn’t it only Le Croche she knew, and who sat with her for hours, until she fell asleep? He saved her life that day, the doctor said!”

“And when my boy got restless and wanted to go off to the city, and we all pleaded with him in vain, and even *Monsieur le Curé* could not persuade him to stay, it was something Le Croche said which made him yield, and we owe it to him that he is a prosperous farmer to-day.”

“And it was Le Croche who obtained my parents’ consent to my marriage with

Jean!"—and there was little need to say that Jean, though a model husband then, had once been the black sheep of the village.

Madame Blais was by this time frankly weeping into her apron at all these tributes.

"He gave my P'tit Paul his penknife to remember him by—and he will never use it without praying *le bon Dieu* for his god-father, wherever he may be!"

* * * *

At sunset that evening the long brown sack was lifted as usual into the high cart at the post-office door, and carefully placed under the seat. A moment later, Le Croche slowly, and with much difficulty, climbed into the trap, and sat down beside Vieux Jean, the driver. The narrow street was filled with villagers; all Sainte Barbe was there to bid him God speed! Both crippled hands were held in successive warm clasps, and the cart was quickly and quietly filled with parting gifts.

There were cakes and pies and bottles of home-made wine, and *sucre du pays*; and books, and prayer beads, and little pictures the owners had treasured for years, slipped so quietly in that only the angel of kind deeds could detect it, or catch the sigh of the

givers as they turned sadly away. Warm wishes, broken thanks, and fond blessings were showered on the dazed traveller, and as Vieux Jean drew the rein, clear and sweet the Angelus pealed out on the evening air. Every head, then, was bent in prayer, and the women wept as they asked the Queen of Heaven to guide and watch over poor Le Croche going forth that night, none knew where.

Le Croche's own head was bowed, as the trap moved away, until the sweet tones of the bells he loved so well had melted into the silence of the hills around. Then he looked up; he was no longer dazed, and his eyes were keenly scanning the fair country scene, bidding it farewell! He saw the one long winding street, and the church keeping guard over the trim cemetery; the homes of his kind friends and their little children; and his own desolate cottage, with its shorn garden. Beyond were the fields of golden grain and waving buckwheat, with the sunset glow resting warm and caressingly about them; and in the distance were the familiar hills, shutting in the peace and quietness of Sainte Barbe from the rude contact of the great world beyond.

Then his eyes left the scene, and the

kindly faces of his well-wishers rose before him. He saw them all—old and young, with the touch of tender sadness, and the tears of their good-byes on them. Tears! because he, Le Croche, crippled and frail and feeble—was going away from them. A sob of pain and joy broke from him, and he turned with his arm stretched out to them, in a last gesture of affection and farewell.

“My friends! My friends!”—he cried, and there was no mistaking his meaning of the simple words.

Sainte Barbe watched the old mail cart until the bend in the road hid it from view, when it was perhaps natural that the little post-mistress should be the first to break the silence.

“And to think that we do not know where he is going—or why he has gone!”—she said dejectedly.

The others shook their heads mournfully. Then a little girl, still looking down the road after the vanished cart, said “I think *le bon Dieu* has made the beautiful lady send for Le Croche!”

“What does the child say?” inquired the post-mistress.

“Oh, it is only one of Le Croche’s

stories," said the mother, stroking her curly head.

* * * *

And yet, perhaps after all the little one was right. Tightly held between his fingers, Le Croche was staring at a little slip of paper, with the words :

*" I am alone—and old and feeble.
Can you forgive? Elise."*

“WHEN IT CAME.”

It had been a long silence. The heavy, lumbering hands of the grandfather's clock had marked the passing of an hour, and the log on the hearth had burned down to a dull red since husband or wife had spoken.

The man had drawn his chair close to the fire, and with hands loosely clasped, he sat gazing long and abstractedly, now into the glowing embers, now at the paper which lay folded across his knee. Once or twice he looked across the room to where his wife sat at the window. The short autumn afternoon was drawing to a close, and her head was bent over the sock she was darning in her effort not to lose the last fleeting gleams of sunshine.

There was a puzzled uneasiness in the man's glance as it rested on her, but the small head, with its neat coil of grey hair, remained bent, and after a moment's hesitation he would resume his gaze into the fire. At length he laid down his pipe and, carefully smoothing out the newspaper, said slowly: “Well, Mary, it is certainly a

surprise, this will of Eben's, and it's hard to believe it all at once." He paused, awaiting a remark which was not forthcoming, when he continued: "He was always a queer fellow, was my cousin Eben; making money one day, losing it the next. No one ever heard of him since he went West to try his luck. And now, to think of his dying out there a rich man, and leaving his fortune to us!"

"And are you certain it is to us?" the woman asked, with her eyes still fixed on the sock.

"Why, yes! at least that's what the paper here means by 'nearest of kin.' Eben never had any brothers or sisters, and mine are all dead. Besides us there's only my nephew Tom it could go to, and it will be his some day—meanwhile it's ours, Mary, ours!"

There was no answer, and the needle sped quickly to and fro.

The man watched it silently for some minutes, then he noticed with quick pain that the hand which held it looked thin and worn. "Mary!" he said gently, "Mary! you shall have that dress now."

Then the woman looked up. She had a very sweet, gentle face, and in spite of the

DISCUSSING THE FORTUNE THAT CAME TOO LATE.



wrinkles it held more than one trace of past beauty and of past suffering.

"Why, what dress, Ezra?" she asked.

"The one we saw in the shop window before we were married; I promised I'd buy it for you when I got rich. Don't you remember it?"

There was a touch of disappointment in the question, and the woman was quick to detect it.

"Indeed I remember it, Ezra," she said eagerly. "It was the loveliest pale blue with little daisies in it and——"

"Green leaves," added the other.

"And it was so soft, and still it *sounded silky*. I have never seen another dress like it—and I have never wanted one so much."

"Well, you have had to wait a long time, but you will have it now," her husband answered promptly; but she answered with a smile that was half regretful, half amused.

"Why, Ezra, I was only a foolish young girl then. That blue silk must be old and worn out now, and faded too, like my eyes. You said they matched it then."

"They're just the same now," the man persisted, but she retorted with a bright little laugh.

"Ezra, dear, are you trying to make fun

of me? A pretty sight I'd be in a pale blue dress now, an old woman with grey hair and wrinkles! No! no! this is good enough," and a rough little hand stroked the black merino softly.

"It will be very nice for you, Ezra," she said presently. "I've been thinking of all you can do, now we're rich. There's that little plot of Neighbour Brown's just to even off our garden; you've been wanting it this many a year. Then you can get another horse to take Beppo's place! you were saying only yesterday how slow he has become."

"Um! yes! poor fellow! but I think he'd feel queer, and I'd feel queer if I were to drive any other horse now. And as to that bit of garden—Brown has always been a good neighbour—we couldn't take his ground, just because we are rich, could we?"

"No!" said the woman quietly; but she looked across at the figure beside the fire with a very loving smile.

It was the man who spoke next. He was looking again at the tired little hand plying the needle so deftly.

"After this, Mary, you will not have to darn, or mend, or——"

The woman shook her head. "That wouldn't do for me," she answered. "I have grown so used to work that I couldn't stop now. And it is not hard work either," she added quickly.

"You never admitted that it was," her husband retorted. "Even that year when things went wrong and the little one——"

"Ezra!" the woman cried suddenly,—
"if—perhaps, if it had come *then* she wouldn't have died!"

"Ah! yes! she would, Mary. It was so ordained, you know!"

"Yes! they said that; they all said that. But they couldn't understand how it felt to see her grow thinner and paler every day that long winter, with the doctor telling me the only chance was to send her south where she'd have the flowers, and the fruit, and the sunshine. God knows I'd have worked my fingers off to do it, but times were hard for everyone that year, and there didn't seem any way. She died for want of the flowers and the fruit and the sunshine!" she ended brokenly.

"And she's been having them all, and more than all, these thirty years."

"I know, Ezra, I know, and I wouldn't call her back if I could; she's better there."

It's only the longing for her that comes to me and that makes me talk that way. I suppose every mother who has lost a little child—an only child—knows that pain ; but it's the feeling that I couldn't give her what she needed that's hardest to bear."

"Well, let us see what we are to do with our money," the man said cheerily.

"I suppose you will have to work a little, if you want to. But, we can buy new furniture. You said only this morning how shabby everything is. Then there will be real china on the table, and silver spoons and forks—and the things you always planned to get. Don't you remember?"

The woman looked round the bare little room, at the two or three wooden chairs that bore the imprint of long service, at the carpet, revealing, despite its many patches, glimpses of the floor beneath. How untiringly she had worked and saved for it in the early married years ! and how proud and happy she had been when it first lay resplendent in the little parlour, and when the neighbours had praised the bright red and green tints now merged into a dull brown. She wondered if it could not be darned yet more carefully.

Then she looked at the table which was

laid for the evening meal, and her eyes rested on the delf set which had been a wedding gift. It was sadly battered, with an edge out of both cups, and the handle of the teapot held in place by tightly-bound wire. She remembered that the child had broken it long ago, and that the father had mended it.

"I don't think I could give up the old set," she said unsteadily. "We could keep it, and look at it sometimes, even if we had a real china one, couldn't we, dear?"

The man did not answer. He was looking at the old mended teapot and the woman wondered if a child's half-frightened cry had come echoing back to him as it had to her across the years.

"Ezra," she said hesitatingly, "when you used to read to me of some country away off you always said: 'When we are rich we'll see that for ourselves.' We can go now if—if we like, Ezra."

"Yes, we can go now if—if we like," the other answered.

Then suddenly there was silence. The half-darned sock fell, unheeded, to the floor, and the woman leaned forward with clasped hands. "Ezra," she cried appealingly, "do you think if we're to go to heaven *rich* she'd know us?"

"I always like to think, when I pass through the big, white gate, that she will come to meet me, holding out her little arms, just as she used to, and crying, 'Mother! Mother!!' and that God will let her explain it all to me, for I might be dazzled, at first, by the gold and the crystal and the brightness.

"But if we went there with what we couldn't give her here, perhaps she mightn't know I was the same mother who used to cut down my own dresses to make little frocks out of them, and who did without things so that she'd have enough; and then, even there, I think my heart would break."

Her voice trembled on the last words, but her gaze was fixed on the sunset sky, as if she saw some fair land beyond it.

A big rough hand was laid, oh! so tenderly, on her own, and the man's voice was strangely husky. "Mary, I think, perhaps, we don't need Eben's money after all!" and when she turned to him quickly, he added: "There's Tom."

"Tom?" she repeated questioningly, "Tom?"

"Yes! Eben's only other relative; the one who'd get the fortune when we're gone—the one who'd get it now, if we didn't take it."

"Why, Ezra!" but the other continued slowly. "He's just a lad, but he has been married a year, and has a little one to work for, too. From what I hear, it's uphill work for them all there in the city. Perhaps his wife wants a blue silk dress, and the baby a change of air, and he—well, he wants much more than he has.

"We can let Eben's money go to them now—now when they're fresh, and young, and strong, and the world's so good to look upon, and when they'll enjoy it as they'll not enjoy it later on. I think somehow we have enough. What do you say, Mary?"

"Yes!" came the quick, low answer. And when the darning was resumed, a moment later, the face which bent over it wore a look of sweet joy and peace.

A CHRISTMAS STORY OF TO-DAY.

PUFFING and snorting, the New York-bound train drew up at the little station of Honylea. Only one passenger was waiting on the narrow platform, a little, old woman, strangely clad, and carrying a large basket.

As the engine whizzed past her, she drew back nervously, but the busy guard with a peremptory "Here's your train, ma'am, it can't wait," pushed her into the end car.

All eyes were directed to the quaint figure, as she entered, looking timidly around for a vacant seat. She wore a bright red shawl, and her white hair was surmounted by a green poke-bonnet of obviously ancient date.

For a moment she stood there, clutching her basket tightly ; then, as the train, with a jerk, started again, she subsided suddenly on the knees of a portly gentleman close by.

It was Christmas Eve, and the car was filled with holiday-seekers, bent on spending the morrow in the city. Every available

space was filled with packages and goodly-sized bundles suggestive of Christmas cheer.

There was a subdued titter, as the new-comer, with tears in her eyes, was set on her feet again. Then a girl opposite, hastily gathering her own parcels, pointed to the vacant seat beside her.

The old woman sank into it with an audible sigh of relief; and then, looking round, included all the passengers in a friendly smile.

"Oh! I do be glad to get settled!" she remarked—"I did think as how I'd never get off safely. Why I'm all of a tremble still!"

The girl smiled sympathetically. "You are not accustomed to travelling alone?" "Accustomed?" echoed the other, "why, my dear, I've not been in a train for well-nigh twenty years; and," she added, "they were different then, I can tell you."

For the time being there was silence throughout the car; conversation was at a standstill, the new-comer being the centre of interest.

All eyes were fixed on her now, as lifting a corner of the white cloth from the basket, she peeped down at the contents, and then turned to the girl with a delighted little nod.

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"My dear, do you take a peep at them mince pies and tell me if you think they're done brown enough." Still unsatisfied with the girl's assent, she leaned towards the old gentleman, asking eagerly : "And do you think they look quite right, sir?"

"Indeed, I think they look delicious," he replied.

"Ah! I'm glad of that," she answered, with a proud little smile, "for I'm bringing them to my son. He used to say in the old days as how no one could ever make them like me; and I hope he won't have cause to say different now."

"Do you always spend Christmas with him?"

"Oh! no!" she answered, "I haven't seen my Joseph for more than five years. You see he is a great lawyer in the city, and hasn't time to spend the Blessed Day with me, so I made up my mind to go to him."

"Then he expects you?" asked the girl gently. "No, my dear," with a joyful smile. "That's the best part of all. I'm going to surprise him." Several of the passengers exchanged glances, and a woman close by asked incautiously : "Are you sure he will be glad to see you?"

"Glad to see me?" echoed the other

indignantly, "glad to see his old mother?—Why to be sure he will—but then you don't know my Joe, ma'am."

There was silence for some moments, though the queer little figure in the red shawl still remained the chief attraction. She herself was totally unconscious of this and took it for granted that her doings would be of interest to all.

"You see it was this way," she continued presently. "Ever since our boy was born we said as how he was different to other babies. Why, before he could talk plain, he would argue with you, till you didn't know where you were. And he was always asking questions, till his father and me were tired answering; and often they were such queer questions that we couldn't have answered them anyhow."

"When he was only five, my poor husband used to say: 'Martha, that boy will be a great lawyer some day, mark my words! We'll have to give him a good eddication, if we work our fingers off to do it.'"

"And we did work and save, and when my good man died, I managed the farm myself, so that when the time came I could send my boy to the best college in the land. And he was always head there—always, and

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it did my heart good when his teacher used to tell me as how I had such a clever son.

"Then he went away to the city. At first he came every month to see me—so I was quite content, but then he got so busy that he could only come, maybe, once in six months, and later on not so often.

"He would write me and say: 'Mother, I'm too busy, I can't get away now.' But every month he'd send me a present, and sometimes a newspaper, with a piece in it saying as how he was one of the greatest lawyers alive. But I wanted to see my boy, so I kept writing him asking if I couldn't go to him—and he always wrote back telling me not to.

"He said as how I'd feel strange and lonely in the city and among his friends, and that I'd better not come. It was just like him to be so thoughtful, knowing how I always hated noise and crowds—but when the winter came round again, the longing in me to see my boy was too great, and so I made the pies and got ready and came; and now, for the first time in five years, we are going to pass the Blessed Day together."

Her voice trembled on the last words—and her eyes were full of happy tears which

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shut out from her the pitying faces around her.

It was not an uncommon story, but coming from those lips an infinitely pathetic one. To all the listeners it was evident that the brilliant young son was ashamed of his lowly mother ; and that in her tender love she had never fancied it.

No one had courage to undeceive her now, as she sat with parted lips and bright eyes, picturing to herself the happy meeting at the journey's end.

Finally there was a stir among the passengers, a collecting of belongings and straightening of clothes, a sure sign that the city would soon be reached. Gradually the snow-bound fields and bare trees and shrubbery disappeared, while the tall chimneys and grim walls took their place.

When finally the train steamed into the station, the old woman drew back into her corner, once more overcome by the noise and stir around her.

A young man entered, looking eagerly around, till with a smile of recognition he hastened to our young friend, the girl, who threw her arms around his neck crying : " Oh, Henry, it is so nice to be home again ! " Then she drew him aside for a

moment while she approached the old woman.

"This is my brother, and if you allow us we shall put you safely in a cab."

The other made no answer, but rose, almost as a child would have done, still clutching her precious basket tightly.

The old gentleman aided her to alight from the car, and then said very kindly : "If things are not what you expect, come to me. This is my address," handing her a card which bore the name of one of the wealthiest brokers of the city.

A woman drew near and hastily slipped a dollar bill into a corner of the basket and stole away quickly, hoping that her little act was unnoticed. And perhaps it was by many, though the Recording Angel surely did not pass it by.

Kindly, pitying eyes followed the queer little figure, as she passed with the girl down the long platform and out into the street beyond. They were simple folk, but for the most part out holiday-making. The little incident of that day would be forgotten in the days of the morrow ; but their lives would be the richer for it. For it was Christmas-tide, when the peace and goodwill of which the angels sang two thousand

years ago still find an echo in men's hearts. Having deposited her charge in a cab, the girl turned away, but the old woman held her arm for a moment and said: "God bless you, my dear, and take a mother's blessing too. May you be done by as you did by me."

Then she was gone, into the rush and roar of the crowded thoroughfares of a great city.

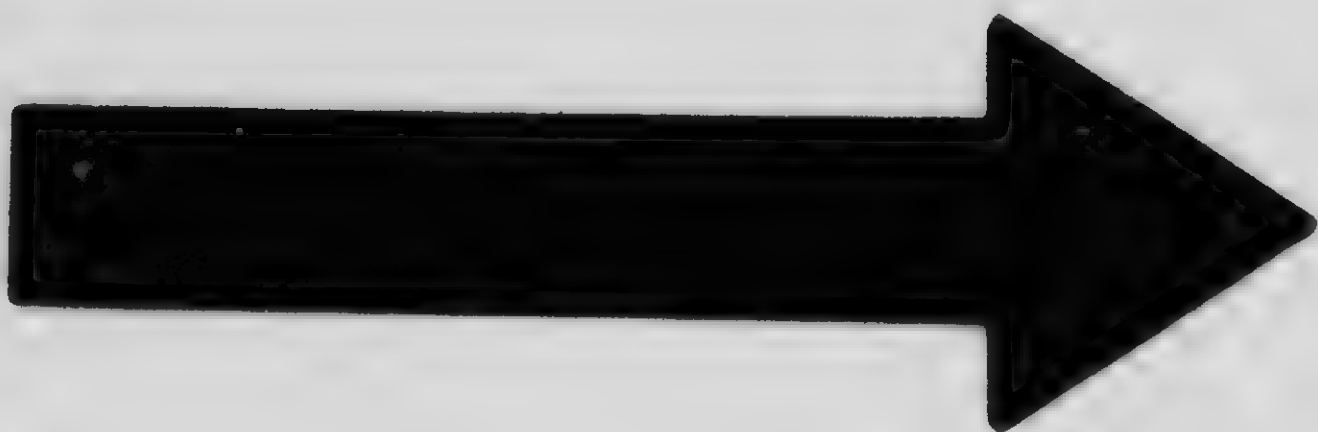
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In Mr. Lloyd's cosy study the curtains were drawn and a bright fire blazing.

He himself, with a pre-occupied air, was seated at his desk, which was littered with law papers and correspondence. He was a man of not yet thirty, with clear cut, intellectual features; determination was imprinted plainly on each.

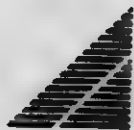
The day had been a tiring one for him. It had been spent chiefly at the courthouse, where he had pleaded more brilliantly than ever before, and had won a famous case.

He well knew that the evening papers would record his success and that he would be congratulated on every side for days to come. However, there was little pleasure in the thought, for among the heap of letters he had recognized a familiar one, which to



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him was infinitely distasteful. He opened it now impatiently and glanced over the first page.

"If you can't come to me, Joe—can't I go to you? Don't let another blessed Christmas go by without our spending it together, dearie."

The man bit his lips with vexation. Why had this reminder of a distasteful past followed on the footsteps of his recent triumphs? He was doing his best to forget it. Why did it continually thrust itself upon him and seek to hamper his future career?

What, he reflected bitterly, would his plain old mother have in common with the men and women with whom he was brought daily in contact? And as to his spending Christmas with her, why he had received invitations to spend it with some of the first families in the city, and he could not refuse now, had he wanted to, merely to satisfy the sentimental whim of an old woman.

No, there was nothing for it but to write his mother telling her plainly that while he would continue to provide for her support, all intercourse between them must be at an end.

It was, evidently, a hasty course to take, but the only one.

A CHRISTMAS STORY. 75

He arose wearily and, walking to the fireplace, sank into an easy chair beside it.

So it was Christmas Eve, after all. He had almost forgotten the fact, until forcibly reminded of it by his mother's letter. Well, she would spend it alone, in the old home, and perhaps think of him and love him still. Thus his fancy ran on, while the bright flames danced in shadows around the room and gradually soothed him to sleep.

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The door opened and the butler entered carrying a telegram. He opened it carelessly and then grew white to the very lips. His mother—dying—wanted to see him again. He rushed into the hall, seized his hat, and a moment later was in a cab, driving swiftly to the railway station.

Yes, he was in time for the out-going train. Thank God for that. But would it not arrive too late?

The journey seemed endless. The fear of finding his mother already dead and his newly awakened remorse made it well-nigh unbearable.

For the first time he saw his conduct in its true light. All his ingratitude and neglect loomed up before him, and, in striking

contrast, his mother's abiding love and trust. How could he have been so heartless, he asked himself over and over again, and his one prayer was that he might still be in time to repair some of his past negligence.

At last Honylea was reached, and jumping into the one waiting carriage, he was being driven home for the first time in long years.

When he alighted at the little cottage, he could not help contrasting it bitterly with his own splendid home, and then, trembling with mingled hope and fear, he lifted the latch and entered.

Ah God ! too late ; for there, calm and peaceful she lay, with her poor tired hands folded and a smile of heavenly peace on her lips. Too late to earn a word of love or forgiveness, or for a look of recognition. He groaned aloud in his agony.

* * * *

"And sir, I told her that you weren't on no account to be disturbed ; but she said she must see you, sir."

Joseph Lloyd found himself starting out of his easy chair, by the fire, which was still burning brightly, while his butler stood in the doorway.

Could it then have been a dream? No, surely it was too real for that. He gazed with uncomprehending eyes at the man who repeated: "Yes, sir, I told her as how you weren't to see anyone. She's an old woman, sir—and poorly clad enough for the matter of that, but she's that determined!—Why, here she is."

A queer little figure came hurrying forward, with a joyous cry; a poor, shabby old woman, but to Joseph Lloyd the dearest in the world. He staggered to his feet, clutching the back of his chair for support.

The butler, with an amazed look, had withdrawn; and the mother and her repentant son were alone.

"Mother, mother, is it really you, can it really be you?"

"Yes, Joe dear, I'm come to spend Christmas with you. Isn't it a lovely surprise, dear? And they said you mightn't be glad to see me—but I knew better, my lad—and I was so frightened of the noise of the streets and——"

A flood of happy tears ended her incoherent words—and her son, holding the little figure in his arms, said to himself:

"Surely it was sent me as a warning from Heaven. I shall take it as such."

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Perhaps pitying angels had planned it all so, that the mother's heart might be filled with joy and peace on Christmas Day.

THE END.

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